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Optimal GED Student Recruitment: Perceptions of Program Directors

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Abstract

Much is unknown about those who do not finish high school and there is a need to understand who enters and completes alternative high school completion programs, such as the HiSet (High School Equivalency Test), GED (General Education Development Test), or growing number of state sponsored high school equivalency programs. The purpose for conducting the study was to describe the perceptions of adult education program coordinators about how to best categorize potential high school credential alternative completers. Using a phenomenological framework and semi-structured interviews, 12 adult education program administrators were interviewed about who enrolls in and completes their programs. A thematic analysis of these responses indicated distinct categories of individuals including opportunists (those looking for better opportunities), exceptionals (those with exceptionalities such as a disability that prevented the individual from completing a traditional high school diploma), immigrants (those validating learning in another country or language learners), and those who have been reformed in some way (eg, those with a history of difficulty with legal situations). By identifying these initial categories of adult learners taking part in high school equivalency programs, recruitment efforts as well as the programs themselves might be better structured to correspond to learner needs.

Keywords

High school equivalency programs, adult learners, non-traditional students, high school completion, GED programs.

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Reclutamiento Óptimo de Estudiantes para Obtener el GED: Percepciones de los Directores

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Resumen

Mucho se desconoce sobre aquellos que no terminan la escuela secundaria y es necesario comprender quiénes ingresan y completan programas alternativos de finalización de la escuela secundaria, como el HiSet (Examen de Equivalencia de la Escuela Secundaria), el GED (Examen de Desarrollo de Educación General) o el creciente número de programas estatales de equivalencia de la escuela secundaria. El propósito de llevar a cabo este estudio fue describir las percepciones de los coordinadores de programas de educación para adultos sobre cómo categorizar mejor a los posibles completadores alternativos de la credencial de la escuela secundaria. Utilizando un marco fenomenológico y entrevistas semiestructuradas, se entrevistó a 12 administradores de programas de educación para adultos sobre quiénes se inscriben y completan sus programas. Un análisis temático de estas respuestas indicó distintas categorías de individuos, incluyendo oportunistas (aquellos que buscan mejores oportunidades), excepcionales (aquellos con excepcionalidades, como una discapacidad, que les impidió completar un diploma de escuela secundaria tradicional), inmigrantes (aquellos que validan su aprendizaje en otro país o estudiantes de idiomas) y aquellos que han sido reformados de alguna manera (por ejemplo, aquellos con antecedentes de dificultades con situaciones legales). Al identificar estas categorías iniciales de estudiantes adultos que participan en programas de equivalencia de la escuela secundaria, los esfuerzos de reclutamiento, así como los propios programas, podrían estar mejor estructurados para satisfacer las necesidades de los estudiantes.

Palabras clave

Programas de equivalencia de la escuela secundaria, estudiantes adultos, estudiantes no tradicionales, finalización de la escuela secundaria, programas GED.

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There are a variety of reports about what the national high school graduation rate is in the United States. Estimates range from below 70% to nearly 90%, with a variety of methods used in calculating the completion rate. The No Child Left Behind legislation removed many of the state variations in determining graduation rates, but despite this attempt at creating a national norm for counting who graduates, there is a lack of state-by-state consistency. And as there is a variety in reporting, there is a lack of understanding about who is actually completing and not completing high school.

One value in determining who is or who is not graduating from high school is the understanding of who might be best prepared or situated to complete an alternative high school credential. And although there are several alternative high school credentials, the GED continues to be the most commonly administered equivalency exam in the US.

As McGowan (2015) reported, there is little research or even consensus in thinking about how to best approach high school dropouts to return to complete a secondary credential. In his study of the existing literature on the topic, he reported a wide variation in the types of recruitment strategies, a finding consistent with Miller et al (2022) who focused specifically on one segment of high school drop-outs. Both findings suggested that there is value in creating a more clear understanding of population characteristics of potential GED participants. Specifically, the purpose for conducting the study was to describe the perceptions of adult education program coordinators about how to best categorize potential high school credential alternative completers.

Background of the Study

Attempting to recruit high school drop outs into equivalency programs has been a significant challenge for over 50 years. Schrieber (1967) noted this difficulty in the mid-1960s, and McGowan (2015) found the same issues 48 year later. There have been a number of studies that have attempted to clarify why students are hesitant to return, and these have ranged from a student feeling a lack of ability (Zimmerman, 2000), a perception that secondary school curricula is irrelevant to the real-world (Bridgeland, et al., 2006), and very recently due to fears related to health and the Covid-19 pandemic (McMorris-Santoro, 2021). Students who drop out also have other fears about safety, including school violence and bullying (Berkold, et al., 1998; Boylan & Renzulli, 2014), and dropping out and staying out has also been related to cognitive ability and learning disabilities (Boylan & Renzulli, 2014).

The motivation to drop-out of high school and not return for an equivalency credential also has a great deal to do with the psychology of being labeled a ‘drop-out.’ McGowan (2015) found in his mid-western qualitative study that men in their 20s and 30s saw little value in returning for a credential, and Goto and Martin (2009) found former students felt rejected and disenfranchised in their urban, inner-city sample of adults. Another consideration that prevents adults from returning to earn their high school credential is the simply routine of life, where family, work, and other responsibilities and opportunities fill an individual’s time and prevent them from investing the time, energy, and resources necessary to enroll in and earn a credential (Bridgeland, et al., 2006).

As research has identified many of the barriers related to completing an equivalency credential, there has also been scholarship devoted to understanding what might work in recruiting adult learners into various forms of educational programs. Lohse (2012) noted that Facebook and social media were effective in reaching adult learners, particularly low-income and female adults. Lohse and Wambolt (2013) extended this work and identified real-time, immediate advertising was especially effective in reaching potential adult learners. These algorithms that align a search activity with local resources was key in matching learner needs and interests with immediately available resources.

Social media has been identified as a strong method of recruiting younger adults into a variety of programs and exposing them to services that might offer an improvement of their lives (Carter-Harris, et al., 2016), such as high school completion programs. These social media platforms, however, tend to present limitations in reaching older, more mature adults, as well as those with either limited access or knowledge of technology (Pedersen et al, 2015). As Dwyer (2016), as well as Miller et al (2022) found, the most successful GED recruitment programs tend to be personal in nature and focus on personal relationships and personal recruitment. Dwyer specifically noted the importance of charisma in recruiting students, and that effective personal recruitment must be based on understanding individual needs and how those needs might be met.

The Miller et al (2022) study used qualitative research methods to listen to successful GED and adult education program administrators. These individuals, who were nominated by peers as being good at their jobs, identified four categories of effective recruitment strategies particularly for African American men. In addition to personal relationships and social media/internet, included the influence of church participation and the relationships developed there.

Research Methods

As an exploratory study, qualitative research methods were used to describe the perceptions of adult education program directors, administrators, and leaders about categories of adults who complete or would be the most likely to complete a high school equivalency program (including the GED or HiSET). The study included interviews with 12 adult education program administrators who were identified through a snowballing sampling technique. The first three administrators had participated in a previous study about GED recruitment strategies and in that study had been peer-recommended as a highly successful adult education recruiter. These three individuals had experience with adult education broadly, but also recruiting adult learners into high school equivalency programs in specific. Each were asked to participate in the study, which they did, and each also recommended others to participate. Ultimately, they identified 23 other adult education program administrators, of which 9 agreed to participate in the current study.

Study participants were asked a series of six questions in a virtual interview setting, in which narratives were transcribed and returned to them for verification of their responses. The questions asked were developed by consulting both the literature on adult education and GED programs, as well as broader literature on high school dropouts. The interview questions were

pilot tested with a group of study non-participants, and the interview protocol was adjusted and edited for clarity, conciseness, and to capture individual responses and stories.

Conceptually, the study was guided by two primary frameworks. From a methodological perspective, the study was guided by phenomenology and an attempt to capture the lived experiences of participants. This methodology and analysis provides for the telling of a story of personal experiences, and attempts to frame multiple experiences into broader themes (Moustaka, 1994). These lived experiences subsequently allow for the creation of categories (Creswell & Poth, 2018), and in the current study, the identification of categories of adult learners who are more or less likely to return to a formal education program to complete a high school equivalency.

From a content perspective, the study was informed by the conceptual framework of college student subcultures, notably the work of Clark and Trow (1966) who in studying college students identified four sub-categories of students: academic, collegiate, vocational, and non-conformist. This classification system, they argued, was instrumental in developing a deeper and more accurate portrayal of who was participating in higher education and how to best serve them. By creating categories of students based on some characteristics, researchers as well as practitioners are able to more precisely identify and deliver services. Gohn and Albin (2006) provided a more recent, updated and thorough classification of college student subpopulations, using both self-identifiers and assigned identifiers to students, and focused this type of classification on its practical uses for student affairs professionals. Similarly, Kissinger and Miller (2009) used the same methodology to explore subcultures of student athletes and their identity, resulting in practical applications for both scholarship and practice. The current study uses the same premise that by being able to specify characteristics of a population (eg, non high school completers who return for a credential), services can be better identified and delivered, in this study, meaning better or more efficient student recruitment.

Results

The 12 adult education professionals who participated in the study came from five different states: 4 from California, 3 from Tennessee, 2 from Illinois, 2 from Massachusetts, and 1 from Michigan. The large number of participants from California was the result of the snow-ball sampling technique, where one of the original sample members simply knew more professionals who were doing a great job with student recruitment. These 12 professionals held a variety of titles, including director ($n=5$; including modifiers such as ‘executive director,’ and ‘agency director’), program manager ($n=2$), recruiter ($n=2$), assistant superintendent ($n=1$), teacher ($n=1$), and counselor ($n=1$). These individuals self-identified as 7 females and 5 males and had a combined professional work experience of 13.4 years working in the general field of adult education. These individuals were employed by 8 public agencies and 4 non-profit agencies.

Interviews for the study were conducted at a time convenient to the participant and made use of an online teleconference software program that provided real-time text capture. This transcript was edited for narrative misidentification and the complete transcript was returned

to the participant for review. Participants were given a week to review the transcript to assure that their comments were accurate and correctly identified what they intended to communicate. Two of the participants made changes to their comments, in both cases adding additional language to what they had said during the interview.

All participants provided an initial indication that recruiting students into adult education programs is hard, but that convincing individuals that they should enroll in a high school equivalence program is even harder. One respondent said

If they wanted to do it [enroll in adult education], they would go ahead and do it. A lot of the people I talk to have a life, and they want to keep on living it. They have a job, even if its not very good. Sometimes they have kids or spouses or whatever, and they need to keep earning that money, so trying to improve their lives isn't something that is automatically obvious.

Another commented

So many young adults, those in their late-20s and 30s just don't see the big picture yet. They live pay-check to pay-check, making \$10 an hour, and they think they have it good. Trying to convey that investing time right now for a long-term advantage is not easy. They resist it for a lot of reasons, but one of the biggest is simply the idea of change.

The majority of questions in the interview were about the kinds of students who participate in high school equivalency programs and how these program directors would describe them. Consistent with the Clark and Trow typology from the 1960s, the intent was not to indicate a percentage of particular demographics, but rather, to attempt to identify broad categories of learners and subsequently how they might be best recruited. Based on the responses from the participants, four categories of students were identified: opportunists, exceptionals, immigrants, and reformed.

Opportunists

As indicated in the literature, possibly the best way to recruit students into programs like GEDs has been identified as showing direct linkages to employment or better paying jobs. Ten of the 12 participants indicated that they were successful recruiting students using these kinds of strategies and described those who responded most favorably to this recruitment message were 'opportunists.' A program leader from Michigan said:

It's all about jobs. When I find someone to talk to or somebody just walks in, my best chance of getting them into a TABE [test of adult basic education] and ultimately a GED program is by talking about what is in it for them. When they realize they can make \$5-\$6 more an hour, you get their attention. These folks sign up to improve themselves and their lives financially. There isn't anything too idealistic about it all, its just a matter of making more money to help make ends meet.

Another program leader, from an urban area in Tennessee similarly described those who enrolled in her GED program as being primarily concerned about self-improvement and an ability to get a better paying job.

When I talk to a person, whether young or old, but maybe particularly someone around the age of 30, we gravitate to talking about jobs. Do you think you want to stay in your same job for the next 40 years? Do you want to make the same \$7 an hour for the rest of your life? No. They get it. They know that they can earn a lot more money and have a better work-life if they earn their GED. They maybe can work indoors. They can maybe have less physical labor. Who knows. But they realize it. They take advantage of it. They seize that opportunity, they are opportunists, and not in a bad way.

Overall, respondents used phrases like “take advantage of the opportunity,” and “creating opportunities for themselves” to highlight the idea that they had students who trying to improve themselves.

Exceptionals

A recurring comment by participants was that are individuals with developmental disabilities participate in high school completion programs for many reasons. One of the primary reasons articulated was that public school special education supports have been seen as “lacking an ability to get students with disabilities across the finish line.” Similarly, a participant from Tennessee commented

So many of these young people don't know what they don't know. And their parents don't know either. They know that their school gives them some support and spaces to get help, but parents don't know who to support their kids with special needs, and the kids themselves sure don't know how to ask for help. It takes time, and what I see is that over time, years after when they were supposed to graduate, there is less pressure and these kids come back to finish [high school]. It's a big deal, it really is. It provides a huge sense of accomplishment.

Another adult education director observed that in addition to there being a lack of support in high school, there is not the stability that many students need. She commented that the secondary school experience is typically “high stress” and that once a student has been out a few years there is a calming effect and a desire to figure out the next steps in life. Her comment included

For a lot of these young adults, they are never going to have the lives that they see all around them. They'll need some support for living independently and they'll often need some employment support, but once they get that space away from school, away from all of the rah-rah and college competition stuff, they begin to contextualize and understand that they need this basic credential to move forward in life.

In regard to supports within high school, four different program directors noted that most programs are filled with teachers who are empathetic and try very hard to be helpful, but “with so many developmentally disabled individuals, it is about timing, and our adult ed programs are there for when the time is right.”

Immigrants

Every adult educator interviewed in the study noted that their programs enrolled large numbers of immigrants. These are individuals who may or may not have completed formal education in their native home country, but at the very least lacked an ability to verify their credential. Their enrollment in high school completion and equivalency programs was described as often a necessity for improved work, pay, and opportunity.

I would say that probably two-thirds of our students are English Language Learners. They're smart, but they need to learn English and they need to show that they have an education. Our programs, especially our high school completion programs can do that. And, we find that we get 'streams' of students. We get one guy in, and he knows four other guys who he might be working with, we get his wife and cousin. Working with students like this really makes me feel like my job is worth it.

Another program director said

We get immigrants from all over the world here, and they tend to find us through referrals from other people, other community centers, churches, neighbors, you name it. And we do a fair amount of language support instruction, but most of these folks are just looking to establish some educational credibility. They want to be able to show that they have a high school equivalency, you know. And by being able to say that they have a high school education, well, that sets them up for better jobs, more respect in their neighborhoods, a better feeling about themselves, all of that. It makes a difference both economically for them and socially.

Although participants were not asked to identify how many students from different categories enrolled in their programs, 5 of the 12 who were interviewed indicated that immigrants made over half of their program participants.

Reformed

Nearly all of the adult educators interviewed identified adults who had previously had difficulty with rules, regulations, and frequently, the law. These individuals seemed to have found consistency and stability in their lives and were interested in reforming their previous behavior. For some directors, these adults used to be "thugs and into drugs and just all kinds of trouble" but that they ultimately "figured out how to play by the rules and that their lives will be better with some education."

A program director from an urban setting in Tennessee commented

We get a lot young adults in their late-20s or early-30s who have just outgrown being a criminal all the time. I mean growing up can take time and life isn't a one-size-fits-all if you know what I mean. Some of these students that we get just got into gangs or trouble with the law, and it takes them 10 or 15 years to sort it out before they make it over my way. And I'm here for them, and I don't judge them for their past, I'm here to focus on helping them find their future.

The program director from rural Illinois said

We've got some good adult education programming in our prison system, and sometimes a student will get started there come over here to finish. And if they walk in my door by their own doing, well, they've made some changes in their lives and they are moving in the right direction.

Participants also discussed a wide variety of descriptors for their students, but most of these other descriptors were only mentioned once or twice. Two program directors noted young mothers as a key user of their services, commenting that they became pregnant in high school and came back to complete a GED. Another group mentioned by two program directors were those who had dealt with personal tragedy, such as the loss of parents or siblings, and the emotional stress caused the student to not complete a secondary credential. Other descriptors included: those who did not respond to typical high school teaching methods, workers, meaning those who worked at part-time or full-time jobs and were focused on making money rather than earning a high school degree, and "late-bloomers," meaning those who simply did not mature in the mid- to late-teenage years and needed more time to figure out what they wanted to do.

Overall, understanding who does not complete high school is the first step to be determined by program coordinators, and those reasons are highly varied and differ based on location. The next step, however, is attempting to determine the time that is right to approach potential students for participation in completion programs. A director commented "its one thing to know why a student dropped out, but its more important to know when you can talk to that person about coming back in." The implication was that maturity and appreciation for the power of a diploma matter a great deal.

Discussion

There are multiple needs in the broad discussion of secondary education both in the US and around the world. Questions about what students should be learning, what competencies they should have, and how best to teach a wide range of learners are not new, but are critical to contemporary society. Developing a strong, educated citizenry capable to college and/or career readiness should continue to be a central focus on what is expected of an education system. Yet in the current system and structure, there are deficiencies, and these deficiencies result in students who one of many possible reasons do not complete the basic secondary credential. The system that must support this structure, then, has to understand who is completing, who is not completing, and how to provide both the content of education and the certification or recognition of this learning. As suggested in these interviews, there are students in schools who do not respond to the traditional modes of instruction that are designed for mass delivery, and educational systems need to be finding ways to respond to them.

The results of these interviews, although limited by the locations and scope of the agencies represented, clearly indicate that there are certain profiles of individuals who come back to complete their high school credential through a GED (or similar) program. The lesson to be

learned from these comments is that there is no universal or ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach to high school program completers, and that any recruitment or program design needs to take into account some of these differences. The standardization of high school curricula and teaching was identified as a reason that students drop-out, and attempting to standardize completion programs may actually have the same impact on students.

These comments also allude to the importance of timing. For some of the learners referenced, the decision to enroll and complete a GED program was clearly framed around maturity and time in life. For some people in society, it is simply a question of being ready to come back to school, whether for economic reasons as suggested in the literature or for self-fulfillment. Again, program directors and demonstration projects should acknowledge and accommodate these differences in life-stage.

Future research should include addressing questions about student motivations to return to complete a GED, what obstacles they might face, and what strategies institutions and organizations can use to facilitate student enrollment and completion. Demonstration projects focusing on community-level organization collaboration with formal education bodies should also be considered as communities look for ways to build more educated community. And, examinations that build on large-scale data rather than individual case studies can prove to be helpful in developing predictive models that might establish the optimal time to recruit and enroll high school drop-outs in completion programs.

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